

DISSECTING THE DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL LICENCE TO OPERATE

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The term “social licence to operate”, or SLO, has increasingly featured in public discussion about commercial operations in the marine environment. As part of the Sustainable Seas National Challenge, we are studying how this term is being used in New Zealand and its implications for industry-community relations.

METHODS



From a series of online searches, we found 99 documents that mentioned SLO in relation to NZ’s marine industries. We analysed sentence structure and verb choice to assess who is given agency to affect SLO.

SECTORS & TRENDS



NZ usage started in 2008, though most occurred after 2012. Seafood sectors combined had more mentions of SLO (38) than mining sectors combined (30). Industry and government were the most frequent sources (Fig.1).

AGENCY



An actor has agency with respect to SLO if the text refers to them as being able to influence SLO. We assigned agency where the actor (i.e. agent) was explicitly identified in the text.

For example, “the community granted social licence” or “industry can build social licence...”

Of 40 documents that assign explicit agency, only 16 give agency over SLO to community and only 5 give agency to iwi. Most give agency to industry and/or central government. (Table 1)

The term ‘social licence’ suggests that communities have power to grant or withhold approval of commercial operations in the marine environment, but the actual wording used by those talking about SLO suggests otherwise.

The verbs used also indicate who is given agency in the documents.

Of 84 instances, 70 involve verbs that refer to:

‘acquiring’,
‘building’,
‘maintaining’ or
‘losing’ SLO.

These clearly refer to industry, while only 6 use verbs that refer to communities or iwi:

‘granting’ or
‘withholding’ SLO.

See Table 2.

Industry and government could change their wording to send a different, more empowering message to iwi and community groups about seeking their acceptance and trust.

DOCUMENTS REFERRING TO SLO OF NZ MARINE INDUSTRIES

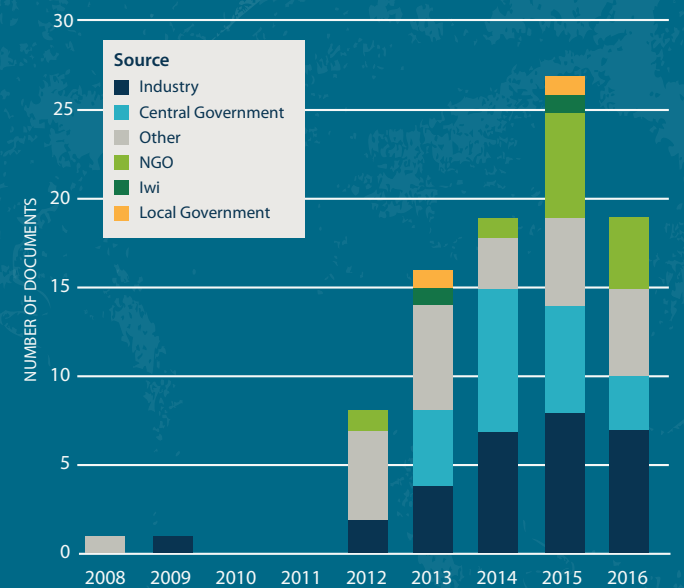


Figure 1. Mentions of SLO in NZ marine industries

WHO HAS AGENCY?

Source	Industry	Central Govt	Industry / Central Govt	Industry / Community	Central Govt / Community	Community	Iwi	Community / Iwi	Scientists	Total
Central Govt	6	1	3	1	2	6	1			20
Local Govt										0
Industry	5			1		3	3			12
NGO	2					1				3
Iwi	1							1		2
Other	1					1			1	3
Total	15	1	3	2	2	11	4	1	1	40

Table 1. Which actors are given agency in documents about SLO, by source category

Industry Central Government Community
Iwi Scientists Total

IMPLIED AGENCY BASED ON VERBS USED

Industry verbs Achieve, Acquire, Build, Buy, Earn, Enhance, Establish, Gain, Grow, Improve, Increase, Lose, Maintain, Obtain, Preserve, Retain, Strengthen, Undermine			
Community verbs Challenge, Grant, Remove, Withhold			
Ambiguous verbs Create, Engender, Erode, Evaporate, Foster, Invest, Reinforce, Support			
	Implied Agent		
Source	Industry	Community	Ambiguous
Central Govt	27	1	2
Local Govt	1	0	1
Industry	17	2	1
NGO	3	1	3
Iwi	1	1	0
Other	21	1	1
Total	70	6	8

Table 2. Implied agency based on verbs used, by source

CONCLUSION



The public discourse of SLO has been dominated by industry and central government voices. They frequently vest agency over SLO with industry and then state or imply that industry already has SLO and just needs to maintain or improve it.

Changing the way we talk about social licence would help achieve the vision of a blue economy, increasing benefits from the ocean environment while sustaining communities and marine ecosystems.

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